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## 6 Unlearning a Commitment to the “We” in a Transnational Feminist Classroom

*Elina Oinas*

Julia,<sup>1</sup> a bright young exchange student, seems confused and agitated during one of my gender studies classes in Helsinki, Finland. The class discusses postcolonial theory, ideals of gender equality and development in the global South. In the online platform Julia writes the following:

I am having a hard discussion with myself and I can't take a position. I find us sometimes to be too critical against west if to consider that we want the best for the others. Aren't our attempts to change situation good? Or my question is, who is the person who says how we have to approach and help those who are oppressed, underdeveloped or those are suffering under gender violence? Isn't failure best teacher? I truly believe that there is no right and smart person who can say what can be best to help them. Of course it is sad that until best solution (never going to happen) is found people have to suffer.

Julia tries to situate herself in the landscape of global questions of development and ideals for gender equality. She does not explicitly address her own background in Eastern Europe, in a former republic of the Soviet Union, a country that since the 1990s is seen as one of the success stories of neoliberal capitalism. She consistently writes about a “we”, and gestures towards an anxious yet self-evident belonging to the “West”, as do also many of the other students. As a teacher I begin to think that such a positionality, a self-positioning, is actually more relevant than I assumed at the beginning of the course.

What does “we” mean here? Is it helpful in the (un)learning process? The “we” talk is a typical feature in a course on “Gender and Development” in a Northern hemisphere university.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I discuss pedagogical approaches to Julia's confusion and the lure of the “we”. What kinds of confusions should universities nourish, and which ones are mechanisms of exclusion and violence? When is discomfort too much? How do we know? Are there classroom positionalities that need to be shaken up and anxieties that are to be encouraged?

University students in all their learning endeavors situate themselves in relation to three concepts: knowledge, hegemony and transformation, argues bell hooks (1994). My course attempts to raise the students’ awareness of and skills to understand and analyze global inequalities as gendered and gendering phenomena. The pedagogical approach strives to facilitate personal reflection and identify and challenge instinctive, automatized personal patterns of thinking in a larger context of social justice, racism and global power relations. The learning outcomes, however, have been disappointingly predictable. My analysis suggests that there is a pattern in how the students from both the global North and South are invited to situate themselves in the framework of postcolonial feminist theory on development, leading to simplified understandings of positionality.

At the beginning of the course students like Julia battle with a set of questions to which they find no adequate answers: Who gets to define development? What are the criteria for adequate knowledge? Initially, the students welcome the realization that there are no simple right and universal formulae for societal development. What then, however, quickly surfaces is the question of “where does this leave ‘us’?”. Some of the questions echo what Sara Ahmed writes about in her ethnography of academic anti-racist work: there is a call for a quick fix, and a constant urgency with one specific question, “what can white people do?” (Ahmed, 2007a, p. 164). In the Helsinki case, it is surprising how popular discursive “we” is, despite widely different backgrounds among the students.

The course materials discuss issues like identity politics and essentializing assumptions about “us” and “them” as well as the need to get marginalized voices heard. For students the emerging challenge is to place the lessons from the course, the importance of positionality, reflexivity and listening respectfully, and an awareness of histories of silencing, in a meaningful relation to what they have been learning throughout their education, ideals about professionalism, rationality and expertise. The anxieties during this course seem to be about emerging subjectivities as knowing future experts (Davies, 2006). The problematic is further complicated by the contemporary alarm about “alternative facts” and threats to a shared concept of reason even among the teachers who earlier embraced the post-structural critical tradition.

One could also say that this chapter, actually, discusses my own experiences as a teacher who is committed to feminist pedagogy but constantly fails, in my own assessment. I have been teaching this course since 2011, involving some 400 students by now. For the sake of comparison, I have also been teaching the *Introduction to Gender Studies 101* since 1994. Here, of course, the important question is what constitutes failure, and, how such failures could be avoided, or accepted as productive (Ahmed, 2007a). The “material” used here is a recent online version of

the course where I explicitly asked the 68 students to choose between chat groups that could be used for research purposes and those that were not. Everyone gave their consent to be used for research. The pedagogy of this particular course was simpler than usual: the students read independently the assigned weekly texts and discussed them in small groups in the online learning environment. The online discussions were mainly unmonitored so there was little or no interference from the side of the teachers.<sup>3</sup> Twenty Helsinki students—the exchange students like Julia, based in Helsinki—also gathered in a weekly seminar where I was present as a teacher. What is remarkable, however, is that the discussions are very similar year after year, and teacher interference plays little role, in my assessment, regarding the feature of the “we” that will be discussed in this chapter. In the seminar I explicitly attempted to underline the problems of a “we” with little impact online.

The analysis first begins with a mapping of the ways the questions are posed in the classroom and online discussions. I argue that there is an academic legacy in universities that invites the young students to ask only certain questions, and, furthermore, to align themselves with a certain configurations of a “we”. This may, of course, be an extra heightened feature in an “intercultural” learning environment with exchange students in Finland (Dervin & Layne, 2013, p. 2). In the following section I will maintain that this practice of utilizing a certain “we” is not innocent or matter-of-factual but a productive force that hampers other alliances. Lastly, I will ask why it is so hard to move on and ask other questions. What could they be? The chapter ends with a discussion on pedagogical methods that could disrupt the unhelpful “we” and enable others.

### **Discursive Tropes for a Unified Position: The Western “We”**

The online discussion forum shows that strong institutional elements prevail, regardless of teacher, or even despite the teacher’s active efforts. Any learning environment is informed by former histories of learning, as well as the wider society, argues the legacy of radical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 2000; Mirza, 2006). University pedagogy inevitably operates by evoking aspirations to pass and belong (Davies, 2006). Higher education institutions have histories—often only barely hidden elitist histories and curricula—that may counteract overt lessons of equality and emancipation, as can be seen in the reactions to students’ call for decolonizing academia (Mupotsa, 2017).

The multicultural, transnational class with students from a rich variety of backgrounds, albeit mainly European yet also globally diverse, is not an element against a homogenizing “we”. Rather, diversity possibly even enhances the search for a shared “we”. There was no explicit discussion about this constantly appearing “we”; it was a habitual rhetoric that was

not commented upon. A few more advanced students did not themselves use a “we”, but did not explicitly criticize it either. The online entries give no information as to the color or ethnic identifications of the students. A few Finns explicitly discuss their experience of global racialized privilege, and a few students state being African, South Asian or “a Third World woman myself”. I cannot analyze the entries in terms of whiteness in academia, but it is possible that an identification with the West works in similar ways as race does, being additionally a class-based aspiration.

The “we” was constructed around a few discursive tropes, often through dichotomous juxtapositions. A juxtaposition between “the West” and the developing world was the most powerfully featuring trope to which the students held on. Western thinking, Western ideals, Western dominance, and subsequently a Western “us” was frequently mentioned, mostly as a negative and oppressive force that needs to be dismantled. The West, for example, excludes the views of the Third World from debates on development. The West is discussed in a manner of it being an active, even self-conscious subject, guilty of a plentiful wrongdoings to the rest; the global South.

The critique of the likes of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, asserting for example that “feminist studies discursively present Third World women as a homogenous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimized by the combined weight of ‘their’ traditions, cultures and beliefs, and ‘our’ (Eurocentric) history” (Mohanty, 1993, p. 42) was explicit both in the reading materials and the online discussions. This, however, left the polarizing categorizations among the students intact. Mohanty’s critique that feminist scholarship inadvertently “produces Western women as the only legitimate subjects of struggle, while the Third World women are heard as fragmented, inarticulate voices in (and from) the dark” (Mohanty, 1993, p. 42) was taken seriously by the students, but at the same time they did not quite know what to do with their awareness. There was a striking lack of hesitance of situating oneself as “Western”: the readings, despite being critical of homogenizing practices, did little to work against an identification with the Western counterpart. As Mohanty (1993) observes, people of color being “granted voice and agency” (p. 52) does not necessarily do any work with the structural power dynamics or positionality of students. It allows them to observe critically, but it does not offer a way forward. For example, a female student from Finland, Anni, writes first a summary of what she thinks is the message of the course yet ends with a rather confused statement:

Western thinking “others” Third world countries and black people and assumes whiteness as a norm and point of departure. The readings show that analyses from the Western perspective do not capture the non-Western women’s own points of view about their situation or needs. Also Western development studies approach its

object through Western values and a fixed world view, leaving little room for the voice of the Third World countries. [...] All of this and the dualistic notions feel very complex to me. Also the authors seem to struggle with the profound problem of how to deal with multiculturalism. How can sincere will to help be expressed and acted upon without being labelled as a privileged white woman who cannot distance herself from her position and perhaps never really understands people with a background in different experiences?

(Anni, 5/2015)

After an account of how the West dominates in a negative way, many students also express anxious hesitance that this critique feels a bit “too critical”. They ask how multiculturalism is to be practiced if “we” have no role. They long for a space where everyone who is committed to a good purpose is allowed to be individuals. Too much focus on the structural threatens or erases individuality, they complain. If there is a sincere personal will to “help”, how can this be wrong? The role for the good white women remains a concern, even a “profound problem”, as for Anni.

Anni phrases her last point in a generalizing manner but her tone can be read as a personal, victimized position. Anything one does will be unfairly judged is the sentiment here, written in such a way that it is clear that the writer already assumes a position of the potentially falsely accused. She suggests that it is unfair that a Western well-meaning woman is labeled. The conclusion in her text later is that despite unpleasant accusations “we”, the Western women, should not give in but keep on engaging for a good cause.

There is little of the “unlearning of one’s privilege as one’s loss” advocated by Spivak (1988) here. Positionality is easily reduced to an act of accounting for a predetermined situatedness in binary categories. The students are critical of the way Western hegemony operates, but this very critique cements the hegemony to a monolith they inevitably belong to and identify with. What is interesting is that students who might not at face value be automatically read as identifying strongly with the West, still do so. For example, exchange students from former Central and Eastern Europe count themselves as Western without any further discussion. Maria, a female student from Czech Republic explains her views:

I think it is hard to see the differences between the various groups of women because we are infected by this black-white logic of Western feminism. It also happened to me when I met an Iranian girl. You know I expected to meet humble and shy woman in the scarf. Instead I met self-confident educated girl with long hair and pretty face. I was

astonished because I did not expect such a person. So I think we are all victims to this typical western feminism. And what we should do about it? I see the solution in the second article more specifically in the part regarding to the building bridges. We really need to get rid of the white moral supremacy and our try to be good and help to free other women. But is it possible? I think this reorientation is pretty hard. As a more realistic I see the attempt to stop generalizing when it comes to the third world women research. Instead we should focus on case studies of some specific groups of women which allows us at least generalize a bit in the rank of these groups. But I am maybe wrong. What do you think?

(Maria, 7/2016)

This account of expectations—“the Third World woman” being less empowered, even less intelligent or beautiful—is here explained with what “Western feminism” had fed to “us”. She admits misjudgment but finds “reorientation” and not generalizing hard. What is noteworthy here is that the students who wrote at length about the need to move beyond a stereotyping notion of the “others” were still eager to identify with a monumental block, “The West”. This occurs even when living in countries like Finland where Westernness was heavily contested during the Cold War. That students who were born during the 1990s write in this way may well be a result of the (trans)national discursive work *for* belonging to the West in these contexts, a discourse so naturalized by now that this generation does not even notice it.

### Travels to the Unknown

A turning point where a growing appreciation for the formerly exoticized happens is often expressed through a personal travel narrative, describing an actual travel rather than a mere metaphorical one. This I find surprising, considering that contemporary students are globally well-connected through media, popular culture and the Internet. In texts by youth born in the 1990s the Western subject admits to its earlier ignorance that is overcome by heroic adventures to the unknown. In the following two quotes the travel narratives were prompted by Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie’s TED talk on the danger of a single story (2009) that was to be viewed that week, but still it is worth to observe how here travels to Asia and Africa are described in astonishingly similar manner in different online discussion groups:

When I decided to go to Africa for the first time two years ago, I really had to fight against the stereotypes that people had in their mind concerning that continent. Even my doctor thought I was crazy

and I noticed at that moment that my relatives were victims of that 'single story' syndrome. When I got back to France, I started to listen to African music, read books by African authors and I am so proud about that today.

(Emilie, 8/2016)

[W]hen I traveled to Cambodia. Everyone in my surroundings asked my, why am I going there? The people are so poor there, they just going to rob me and just wanted to have my money, they heard stories in the newspaper about this. And this is exactly what Chimamanda Adichie brings up. This stereoty(e)s and rumors what comes up in the newspapers, when something happens stuck to their heads and was the only way this beautiful country was seen. And I could not deny it, it was really hard to get this way of thinking out of my head when I was there. At the beginning everyone who talk to me or offered some help, in my mind the alarm rings that they just want to have my money. The good thing was, that I was proofed wrong. I was able to see this sophisticated. Of course there where some people out of the majority who wants to rob me, but they are in Germany as well and no one refers to Germany as such a dangerous country where everyone just wants to get your money!

(Greta, 3/2016)

In both texts the starting point is a simplifying set-up, a scary Africa or Asia that Europeans in general fear. By travel this view is nuanced. The foreign becomes interesting. It is admirable and generous to be interested, against the Western stereotypes. The positionality of a less ignorant Western is achieved by a confession and the bravery of moving beyond the confinement of the safe.

### Privilege Walks

Institutional worlds form around certain bodies, but not others, argues Sara Ahmed (2007b) with Frantz Fanon (1986). An academic learning environment is not neutral but embraces some learners with a warm welcome and marginalizes others (Ahmed, 2007b). In online learning, in the absence of actual bodies, a similar pattern still emerges, offering certain scripts for students. Pedagogy is always about subjectivity, creating available subject positions for the learners to occupy and feel qualified to do so (Davies, 2006). The individual effort to knowledge that enables one to pass as an academically achieving student is a negotiation with not only a teacher but a collective that can either embrace or refuse one's attempt to be curious in the right way. It seems that



through a rhetorical “we” as critically “Western” an entitlement to a space to learn and grow was assumed to be achieved in the case of the course studied here.

One of the final activities was a so-called Virtual privilege walk, an online quiz that is commonly used in this type of teaching, where a long list of personal questions lead to a score between 0 and 100.<sup>4</sup> Against its good intentions, this exercise seems to have locked and fixed the notion of privilege to a situation rather than a relationship or agency. There was little dynamism in the ways privilege was discussed; rather it had to do with background factors that could be counted. Privilege became a form of essentialized *being* rather than doing:

I wanted to end [this discussion] with the Virtual Privilege Walk. I had the score of 96, and you? I knew I was privileged but that test made me realize how much I am favored !!! There are only four answers for which I cannot get a point, almost all the sentences are true for me. I just realized how much my life is easy compared to the life of some people. I think they should take this test in western schools for people to think about their life and their privileges.

(Amelie, 9/2016; female exchange student from France)

My score for the Virtual Privilege Walk was 96, I was not that surprised about my score I grow up in a very small town in Italy where there is not a lot of diversity.

(Silvia, 9/2016)

In the latter case it is assumed that growing up in a homogenous rural setting constitutes a privileged background. From a more cosmopolitan point of view, could not the life circumstances of such young people be seen as alarmingly limited? How can weak ties to a larger world and lack of diversity be a privilege? Many of the comments repeated that it was helpful to become aware of one’s score, but the strengthened self-reflexivity reveals a very narrowly defined idea of reflection as confession. Whether socio-political and economic global location is politically or culturally enabling or enriching is not addressed by such a counting exercise.

Only in one text is privilege seen as a loss, a loneliness, discussed here by an advanced level gender studies student, a Finn who lives in West Africa:

I am not really a woman there even though I look like a woman. But I am not seen as a real woman there, not in the same way the locals are. I am something between man and a woman. I am not treated as a woman but for example given more flexibility in social situations, given more freedom, less expectations. But at the same time I am

not part of the women. Nor am I part of the men. In a way I'm a representative of sexual minority, perhaps privileged one, but it's still a lonely place to be.

(Emma, 8/2016)

Some students got lower scores but still found the exercise interesting:

I enjoyed filling in the Virtual Privilege Walk. It contained stuff I never thought about. I think people take a lot of things for granted. Such a questionnaire has the power to point at things you have, instead of seeing the glass always as half empty. I had a score of 67, but this isn't too shocking for me because I am from a non-academic background. Nevertheless, I think the task was important for me and I enjoyed it.

(Martin, 12/2016, Belgium)

The low score is compensated by his current education, indicating that his privilege is not a stable position depending on background. For Martin too the exercise appears as a list of attributes. The narrow definition of privilege means that it is reduced to either class or geographical location. As a location the West becomes a place one inhabits, rather than an idea or ideology one can refuse and fight against.

In hindsight I realize that what gender studies teaching can and should do in the face of such confessional practice is to work actively against the tendency to locate oneself. Instead of simply identifying personal and fixed locations, one can learn to strategically situate oneself in a network of power that gets its fuel from ideas such as the West, or parochialism or middle-class habitus as privilege. The teacher can try to shift the focus away from geography, race and class as objects to be owned, to networks of power, relations and alliances that need to be revealed, problematized and dismantled. In the course I tried to explain the idea of the West being tightly connected to global neoliberal capitalism that no one is predetermined to support, but much more time would have been needed. One lesson learned is that when teaching and studying gender there needs to be a clearer focus on global political economy, as a counter-force against the taken-for-granted essentializing assumptions of location, geography and privilege.

### Academic “we”: Conceptual Work

In addition to these ways of belonging to a Western “we” that rely on essentialized locations in the world—inherited privilege, ability to travel to a space defined as exoticized, growing up in a certain place—an identification with the academic “we” occurred during the course. The academic “we” requires active work in comparison to the passive looking

location based “we”, but as said, the claim to Westernness also is an active construct. Academic belonging, in online learning is achieved through vocabulary. While work towards mastering vocabulary can be a way of reaching towards new ways of thinking as concepts generate an analytical distance than enable a more nuanced way of seeing phenomena, concepts, names and theories can, however, be used as checklists, tools with which to judge, too. In online teaching concepts can become standard items that must be mentioned in order to qualify. If, for example, only “women” are mentioned, an alarm for transphobia is seen as legitimate in the wake of the LGBTIQ awareness. In the exercise where students analyzed social movement, NGO or policy texts, absence of some words was read as evidence that the organization was less sophisticated. Usage of certain concepts was assessed in the documents as if they in themselves were requirements. A less up-to-date terminology used by a policy maker or activist women’s movements of the South, reveals little about the relevance of the actor in the local context, but academic learning environments encourage vocabulary policing.

The pedagogy of hierarchy in knowledge production and the practice of assessment of conceptual skills that the students themselves are constantly subjected to, becomes a practice they use in their own critical work. The word-policing mentality that governs students is by them translated to a skill. In universities qualifications for what constitutes a legitimate argument and what language qualifies is explicitly set as a learning goal. When this is the curriculum, one cannot be surprised that the students practice the criteria back, and of course sometimes in rather superficial ways. A paradoxical problem arises when it is also argued that they should encounter “alternative voices” with respect and interest. They are, thus, placed in a tough spot of different rules applying when analyzing global policy documents, feminist movements and other gender actors of the South.

A similar dilemma appeared when the learning goals were to regard structural issues as important as well as to also appreciate marginalized communities’ own perspectives. The assignments that critically assess the policy documents for their lack of a structural analysis do not ask for an account that would highlight poor women’s own views on structural injustices. “Structure” remains rather a vague concept, which is typical for social science students, and perhaps more senior academics too. Remarkable here is, however, that the texts that remind the reader of the importance of including grassroots voices in policy design and implementation do not seem to entertain the idea that these women do not offer merely their own viewpoints to the circumstances of their lives, but an effective analysis of how the societal structures operate and are sustained.

The academic culture of knowledge assessment as achievement and a skill can be a way of asking new questions, but equally often it reveals an elitist selection process of measuring vocabularies. Rigor with concepts

became often not a tool to cultivate more generous and open thinking, but a stressful pressure that limited the online chat. Any comment in a “wrong” way was feared as a mistake, potentially stupid or insulting:

All this needs so much processing. After readings I feel suffocated, one should be such an expert and be able to take into account all kinds of views if you want to act in an ethical way, and so that everyone can approve, when working in the developing world from the position of a Western human being.

(Jenni, 3/2016; female student, Finland)

The students often struggle with words, and maintain that they are too hesitant about how, for example, race or ethnic minorities should be named. A certain level of confusion and uncertainty is productive but staying with anxiety on how to even have a conversation can be paralyzing. The different emotional expressions deal with different attitudes to certainty. When is it helpful to a student to feel “safe” in a learning process? When considering what Vanessa Andreotti (2010) names “post-colonial and post-critical ‘global citizenship education’”, an ability “to cherish life’s unsolved questions and to sit comfortably in the discomfort and uncertainty that it creates” (p. 241) seems important. Discomfort and interruptions enable new openings. Challenging and disrupting a Western “we” seems important, but is there a way of assessing when a confusion is productive and when not?

Sara Ahmed suggests that there is an automatized ease with which white bodies take up academic spaces (2007b). In a virtual learning environment a similar ease can be created through the usage of a “we” and certain vocabulary only. Making assumedly innocent alliances with power visible and thereby shattering the self-evident safety that the alliance provides cannot be but a helpful exercise. This, however, needs to go beyond an individual. For the teacher, a way of going about this is to avoid accounts that are too attached to individuals, so that the work of talking back to power does not appear as a personal attack on a student. Therefore, the usual feminist focus on experiences may actually be counter-productive. Unless experience is explicitly understood as historical, contingent and the result of interpretation, it can “coagulate into frozen, binary, psychologistic positions” (Mohanty, 1993, p. 52).

Avoiding too intimate discussions about personal experiences and sentiments is needed to protect the self-assumed privileged students from feeling attacked when they are pushed to seek alternative views. Likewise, the students who write about their backgrounds in Third World settings, or present themselves as racialized student voices may benefit from a pedagogy that does not encourage dwelling in experiences. There were several African and Asian students in the course whose inputs were an important resource as long as there was caution that they were not

framed as the ones who introduce authentic experiences or voices for the subaltern. Most students struggle to fit in, in what they assume as the academic formula for the course, for example, a certain mode of reflexivity and critical thinking. Reading bell hooks (e.g., 1994) and similar unorthodox yet academic authors was one way of disrupting the habitual manners of how this struggle takes shape and who is automatically marginalized.

## **Pedagogical Avenues Forward**

One of the tasks of the teacher is to work actively against homogenizing positionalities in any gender studies class, and to facilitate a deconstructive practice among the students. This is probably extra difficult in online learning with a diverse student group. It is also possible that in online pedagogy the student journey is simply more explicitly available for observation due to the clumsily written chat forums, often in weak English.

Ideally, online teaching requires active teacher participation that does not dismiss any student entries, but actively asks further questions. Of course, a careful selection of texts is also a key to any high quality teaching. When a longer legacy of feminist thinking is needed an appropriate framing of older texts, explaining why certain discussions were essential in different points of time, is useful. What I would like to propose here, however, is that the teacher should not be expected to be a miracle worker, as the task is monumental. The presence of a strong “we” is not a mannerism of some individual, privileged students but a discourse that is inherent and pervasive in academic learning even when constantly worked against. In feminist pedagogy a long legacy of working against a dualistic discourse of power that the students ally with has been established, yet, in each course with new students the journey needs to begin from point zero.

Dismantling the existing paradigm of hegemonic thinking is not anything one achieves within the time frame of a few weeks. Teaching, even within a feminist and emancipatory framework, within a university far too easily cements a class- and race-based hierarchy of knowing and argumentation that again seeks its nourishment in dualisms and easy positionalities. Even the practice typical for gender studies, the explicit agonizing over power imbalance, may further strengthen unhelpful binaries.

At first, my instinctive reaction was to retreat from the personal, the feminist pedagogy of friendly, accommodating, comfortable chat, with focus on personal reflection and experiences. Rather, an analytical distance should be encouraged, I figured. Less talk about experiences and own feelings; more text-based debate. Yet, the surfacing of the emotional anxieties simply revealed what would have been there anyway, and pushed the participants to be aware of the dualistic paradoxes trotting

around in their thinking. The openness about personal thoughts probably to some extent encouraged everyone to join the choir of a unified “we”, but in its blatant presence hopefully also made the entire class to do some work with it.

The political economy of capitalism of the world and uneven globalizations that remain hidden in the all-embracing notion of the “West” (cf. Hearn, 2015) is evoked by this “we” and should be actively addressed. Repeating a narrative of “Western triumphalism” (Hu-DeHart, 1993, p. 11), even if in a guilty version, seems to only further cement its power. Exposing “West” as a political commitment to a certain version of global capitalism may act as “demystificatory criticism” (West, 1993, p. 19). A loosely defined “West” needs to be firmly deconstructed not only because it constantly appears among the students and in texts but because the students so strongly and yet ambivalently feel they need to identify with it. It is a signifier that is far from empty. Identifying with it is tied to an academic “we” in university teaching. The teacher who does not merely support self-claimed privileged students’ emancipatory projects is however taking on an uncomfortable task. Disrupting a longing for a comfortable, feminist “we” is not necessarily appreciated by students who assume an empowering environment in gender studies. The teacher, too, often looks for relationally defined subject positions and alliances.

## Conclusions

Teaching in gender studies, and perhaps even more particularly “Gender and Development”, triggers students to be critical of so-called “Western thinking” and Western imperialism. In this chapter I have discussed this critique as a practice that may further enhance the students’ sense of belonging to that very entity. While the students learn to take a critical position against Western notions, they also seem to find it inevitable to identify with it. This, I believe, has to do with the university as a specific, class-based and racial institution: it invites the students to join a self-critical global elite. This is a compelling invitation even if there are many, of course, who refuse its lure and others who are never quite invited despite academic degrees. Specific practices of reflexivity as in essentializing situatedness, certain alliances and commitments to a vocabulary are academic pedagogical practices that attract the students to a “we” with the very institutions they learn to superficially criticize.

In a university the student has at least two conflicting objectives. One is supposed to learn as much as possible in order to become a competent expert in a future society that will invest heavily in knowledge-based industries. One is also asked to critically assess prior assumptions, dismantle their authority, let go of outdated legacies and curiously seek new ways for thinking. Julia’s anxiety is an embodied exhibition that there

are bodies who pass as the right critical minds and others who are easily relegated to a category of too rigid or too confused. The paradox of learning and unlearning; absorbing and deconstructing leaves room for the university to weigh its criteria so that only some students easily pass as the precisely suitable ones, the ones with a perfect balance between qualities. To pass as one of those, an employment of a confessional “we”, is a strategy.

A strong commitment to a “we” as Western subjects, even if it were through a confession of the sins of the West, is an outcome of institutional practices that are hard to break. Positionality is taken seriously in feminist pedagogy but it is often understood in a surprisingly essentializing manner. One is located within and against a stable background. Taking distance from it would mean denial of one’s privileged position, and after all, all university students are by definition privileged. Too often reflexivity about positionality and situatedness is equated with an acknowledgement of where one passively stands. Standing is not a metaphor but can be taken literally, it is an ownership that some bodies may assume towards the promise of the West, even with its cruel crimes against Others. The students act in a class-based anticipation of the “immanent tendencies of the field”, as Lisa Adkins (2009) puts it, by situating themselves on the side of their assumed hegemonic position, while being critical.

I suggest here that the neoliberal capitalist “we” should be one of the major challenges for gender studies teaching, yet it is not easily overcome. The difficulty has to do with both global power relations in general, and the universities as institutions in particular. Gender studies are not only spaces for rebellion and revolution, they are places of student credits and staff careers too. Yet, “we” can only keep on trying, I feel urged to say. At times gender studies classes succeed in being spaces for productive disruptions. Pedagogy can enable constructive confusion where one gets to lose grounding. Such reflexivity does not refer to an awareness of a fixed, essentialized positionality but a loss of it.

## Notes

- 1 All names are pseudonyms.
- 2 The course “Gender and Development” is taught in English, attracting exchange students as well as degree students from both the University of Helsinki, Finland and elsewhere. For many this was the first course in Gender Studies and Development Studies alike. University level education was, at the time of the research, 2016, free of cost for everyone.
- 3 The course was co-designed and co-taught with Piia Lavila.
- 4 The original source for the one we used is no longer available online, but similar Privilege Quizzes and Walks can be easily found on the Internet, for example <https://peacelearner.org/2016/03/14/privilege-walk-lesson-plan/> and [www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/how-privileged-are-you?utm\\_term=.agQmWlk1V#.bbwPeO5d](http://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/how-privileged-are-you?utm_term=.agQmWlk1V#.bbwPeO5d).



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